

“Even Though...I Shall...”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 7, 2017
The Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Texts: Psalm 23 Ezekiel 34: 11-16 John 10: 11-18

Psalm 23 (KJV)

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16 (NRSV)

¹¹ For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹² As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

John 10: 11-18 (NRSV)

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

Sermon

“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me.” [1]

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“Tell me, what Holy Scriptures or readings would you like shared at the funeral?”

This is one of the set invitations that I offer grieving families while planning a service for a dearly departed. Invariably their answer includes Psalm 23. Far and away the 23rd Psalm has been requested by grieving families more than any other text, secular or spiritual.

What do you think it is about this particular psalm, this song of faith, that touches so many hearts and minds in times of crisis and loss, of doubt and wonder?

Is the Psalm 23 popular because so many of us had to memorize it for a gold star sticker in Sunday school, and consequently the 23rd Psalm stuck in our heads and has never left us, returning time and again to the forefront in times of grief and despair and challenge?

Is Psalm 23 memorable because of the poetic nature of the verse, the rhythmic way the shepherd’s song rolls off the tongue the way its metaphors capture our imagination?

Is Psalm 23 celebrated
because it echoes with a voice of confidence and assurance,
singing and praying with an attitude of hope,
a hope that permeates darkness and brings light to the soul?

Is it the 23rd Psalm's grounding
in the oft-told tale of King David?
David is credited as the writer of the 23rd Psalm.
He started as a shepherd in the fields of God
before he was anointed to shepherd the chosen people of God.
Imperfect, bold, flawed, brave, faithful, authentic, we can relate.

Is Psalm 23 delightful
to the ear and the soul because of its deep-felt joy,
the joy one feels when laying down in tall grass
or sitting by a clear stream
or being anointed for a life-long journey
replete with meaning and risk and passion?
The Prophet Ezekiel identified the qualities of God's
love
as like that of a shepherd.
King David would have been familiar with this passage of Scripture.
He would have understood when Ezekiel pointed out
that just as a shepherd guides and protects and cares for his or her flock,
so, too, does God lovingly watch over us, no matter what.

¹¹ For thus says the Lord God:

I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

¹² *As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep,
so I will seek out my sheep.*

I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered...

¹³ *...I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses,
and in all the inhabited parts of the land.*

¹⁴ *I will feed them with good pasture...*

*there they shall lie down in good grazing land,
and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.*

¹⁶ *I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,
and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,
but the fat and the strong I will destroy.
I will feed them with justice.*

Feast, my friends, says Ezekiel, on the justice, goodness and mercy of God.

What do you think, is Psalm 23 one for the ages because we relate
to the fact that we have walked through valleys of the shadow of death.
We who at times and places and moments have been so afraid, so very afraid,
yet we also know deep down within that we are to fear no evil
for God is with us every single step of the way.
The presence of God is not to deny us our fears – not all fear is bad.
Rather God is nigh to help us cope and address our fears
all the while seeing us clear into the tomorrows sure to come.

If and when we forget or waiver or wander from the path like lost sheep,
the 23rd Psalm serves
to reel us back in, back home, back to God and ourselves.

God, like a Good Shepherd, like a Loving Guide, is with us.
In that amazing grace, in that assurance of faith, we find immeasurable comfort.

The United Church of Canada creed draws upon this text, this faith, saying,
“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me.”

*“The Rev. Dr. George W. “Bill” Webber,
a former president of New York Theological Seminary
and a well-known leader in urban ministry,
[was born in 1920 and passed away in 2010 at age] 90.
Best known for his passion and work for faith-based justice,
Webber helped shape the perspective of several generations
of Protestant clergy engaged in urban ministry.” [2]*

Countless fellow Christians were blessed to witness his selfless work
and teaching ministry in East Harlem and across the city and country.
I consider myself richly blessed to have been raised in the light of his life.

Among many gifts and skills, Bill was a teacher, and he loved to teach the faith.
Bill Weber taught Sunday school in his congregation.
He taught students in seminary.
He taught men incarcerated in prison how to be ministers.
He loved to share the Good News of the love of Jesus Christ.

I heard Bill Weber preach once that the 23rd Psalm had always been a staple,
a centerpiece of his prayer life, worship life, and teaching life.
He said he made sure his students knew the 23rd Psalm,
and it was offered aloud in most every service he presided.
Bill Weber had tremendous confidence in God,
and yet he shared in his sermon that periodically he got a nagging feeling,
the kind many of us may experience every now and then,
when he wondered if he was making a difference.

He then told a story of the day a young man walked into Bill's study.
He had been a teenager in Bill's church youth group.
Now he was all grown, and had just returned from boot camp
where he trained to be an Army Ranger.
The soldier said to Bill Weber,
"Pastor, let me tell you what happened.
They took me and my platoon up in an airplane,
and then they said to put on parachutes, jump out the plane,
count to 10 and pull the cord.
I was so scared.
I didn't want to jump.
The sergeant took me to the door and kicked me out.
I was so scared while I was falling I didn't do anything I was supposed to do,
like count to ten or pull the cord.
Then I remembered the prayer you taught me in church every Sunday.
I started to pray the 23rd Psalm.
I calmed down 'cause God was with me,
so I pulled the cord, and my parachute opened,
and all the way down I said the 23rd Psalm over and over again."

(Join with me, if you like...)

*· The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
· He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters.
· He restoreth my soul:
he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
· Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
· Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
· Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

"In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me."

Even though ... I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...
I shall...fear no evil, for though art with me...

Even though ... I have died and been resurrected more times than I can count...
I shall ... trust in the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit

Even though...I have been oriented, disoriented, and reoriented again and again...
I shall ... persevere, with the help of God.

Even though ... I sit in the presence of my enemies at a table the Lord prepares ...
I shall ... remember that "thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

Even though ... I wrestle with relationships that seem more polarized than ever...

I shall ... trust in the anointing power of God's baptism to lead us forward.

Even though ... the Lord calls me forth to be a reconciler and agent of grace.
I shall ... draw deeply upon the overflowing well of God's call to loving service.

Even though ... I wonder whether goodness and mercy and justice abide ...
I shall ... dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Even though ... I get disappointed in people and sometimes discouraged ...
I shall ... dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Even though ... the Church is an imperfect movement and can drive even the sanist soul to distraction or to seek distant climes...
I shall ... dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with me.”

A few years ago we hosted a powerful service of healing
for hospice caregivers, nurses and chaplains.
Think about it.
Every patient that a hospice caregiver ministers to
passes from this life into the next.
We wondered, “Who ministers to the ministers of healing?
Who cares for the wounded healers?”

Rev. Adei Grenpastures took the point and planned a worship service
early on a weekday morning.
Hospice caregivers from across Atlanta came together for prayer in our Chapel.

During the service every hospice caregiver was invited to come forward
to be anointed with healing oils and for the laying on of hands and prayer.

Two Elders served as guides to walk alongside
the caregivers, nurses and chaplains
as they came forward, one at a time.

Adei Grenpastures said one Elder guide was Mercy and the other was Goodness.

You see, God's Goodness and Mercy walk with us.
The Word has been made manifest in Christ and in you and me.
Divine Presence and Peace are incarnate in the here and now,
God's love with some skin on it.

***In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with you and me and the whole people of God.***

All power be to the Creator, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] From the Creed of the United Church of Canada

[2] The Christian Post, July 10, 2010.